

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Remarks at a White House Event Celebrating Music From the Civil Rights Movement

February 9, 2010

Welcome to the White House, everybody, and thank you for braving the storm. I am thrilled to see all of you here today—friends, guests, members of my Cabinet, Members of Congress, our Vice President and Dr. Jill Biden, and everyone watching at home—for the fifth in a series of evenings celebrating the music that tells the story of America.

Tonight we celebrate the music of the movement. To help us do that, Michelle and I are thrilled to welcome a tremendous group of artists who influenced that music and artists who were influenced by it: Yolanda Adams, Joan Baez, Natalie Cole, Morgan Freeman, Jennifer Hudson, John Mellencamp, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, Smokey Robinson, the Blind Boys of Alabama, the Howard University Choir, and a man who was good enough to take a night off from his never-ending tour, Mr. Bob Dylan.

I want to thank some of them for spending some time earlier here today leading a workshop of high school students, perhaps even inspiring the next generation of civil rights leaders.

Let me also just acknowledge a good friend to us all, Dr. Joseph Lowery, who was here—or who couldn't be here with us today, but he is recuperating after an illness, and we want to keep him in our thoughts and prayers tonight.

Now, the civil rights movement was a movement sustained by music. It was lifted by spirituals inspired by the Bible. It was sharpened by protest songs about wrongs that needed righting. It was broadened by folk artists like a New York-born daughter of immigrants and a young storyteller from Minnesota who captured the hardships and hopes of people who were worlds different from them, in ways that only song can do.

It was a movement with a soundtrack, diverse strains of music that coalesced when the movement was right. But that soundtrack wasn't just inspired by the movement; it gave strength in return, a fact not lost on the movement's leaders.

It's been said that when Dr. King and his associates were looking for communities to organize and mobilize, they'd know which were disciplined enough and serious enough when they saw folks singing freedom songs. Dr. King himself once acknowledged that he didn't see "the real meaning of the movement" until he saw young people singing in the face of hostility.

You see, it's easy to sing when you're happy. It's easy to sing when you're among friends. It's easy to sing when times are good. But it is hard to sing when times are rough. It's hard to sing in the face of taunts and fear and the constant threat of violence. It's hard to sing when folks are being beaten, when leaders are being jailed, when churches are being bombed.

It's hard to sing in times like that. But times like that are precisely when the power of song is most potent. Above the din of hatred, amidst the deafening silence of inaction, the hymns of the civil rights movement helped carry the cause of a people and advance the ideals of a nation.

Bernice Johnson Reagon knew this. One day when she was young, she was sitting in church when a local sheriff and his deputies showed up to intimidate the congregation. "They stood at the door," Bernice wrote, "making sure everyone knew they were there." "And then,"

she said, "a song began. And the song made sure that the sheriff and his deputies knew that we were there."

Joan Baez and Bob Dylan knew this. One day in 1963, they joined hundreds of thousands on the National Mall and sang of a day when the time would come, when the winds would stop, when a ship would come in. They sang of a day when a righteous journey would reach its destination.

And Congressman John Lewis—a man of that Moses generation, a man who couldn't be here tonight, but whose sacrifices helped make it possible for me to be here tonight—he knew this too. For in the darkest hour, he said, "The songs fed our spirits and gave us hope."

So to everyone here or watching at home, let us enjoy the music we hear tonight. Let the music feed our spirits, give us hope, and carry us forward as one people and as one nation. Enjoy.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:08 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to civil rights activist Joseph E. Lowery. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on February 10.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Civil rights music, White House celebration.

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Names: Adams, Yolanda Y.; Baez, Joan C.; Biden, Jill; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Bowers, Bishop Billy; Carter, Jimmy; Cole, Natalie; Dylan, Bob; Freeman, Morgan P., Jr.; Hudson, Jennifer; Johnson Reagon, Bernice; Lewis, John R.; Lowery, Joseph E.; McKinnie, Eric "Ricky"; Mellencamp, John C.; Moore, Ben; Obama, Michelle; Pierce, Tracy; Robinson, William "Smokey," Jr.; Williams, Joey.

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